

CHAPTER 1 | LESSON 3 How Archaeologists Study the Past

Louis Leakey: In Search of Human Origins

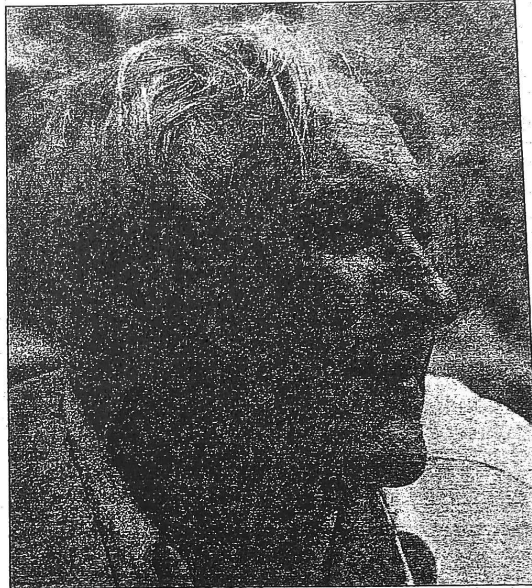
Louis Leakey (1903–1972) discovered many fossils of our early human ancestors. He and his family changed the way scientists think about the origins of humankind.

Louis Leakey was born on August 7, 1903. His parents were British missionaries in what is now Kenya. Louis had a childhood that was far from ordinary. He grew up among members of the African Kikuyu tribe. He played with Kikuyu children and learned to speak the Kikuyu language fluently. When he was 13, he became an official member of the Kikuyu tribe. Later, in 1937, he published a study on the Kikuyu culture.

Fossil Hunting When Louis was 12, he found his first fossils. He decided then that he would become an archaeologist—a scientist who learns about early humans by digging up and studying the traces of early settlements. He attended Cambridge University in England. In 1926, he earned degrees in both archaeology and anthropology, a related field. Then Louis headed back to Kenya to begin his search for fossils of early humans.

The Cradle of Mankind When Louis began his career, most archaeologists thought that human life had begun in Asia. Louis disagreed. He believed in a theory put forth by Charles Darwin, a 19th-century scientist who wrote about evolution. Darwin claimed that humans had first appeared in Africa. Louis wanted to prove Darwin right. He set out to show that “Africa is the cradle of mankind.”

Louis chose Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania as the main area of his search. The gorge is about 30 miles long and 300 feet deep. Louis searched in Olduvai for 20 years before finding an important skull in 1948. The 20-million-year-old skull belonged to a creature that was pre-human. Years later in a speech to the National Geographic Society, Louis described Olduvai Gorge as giving “one of the most remarkable stories of the past—the last chapter of the earth’s history, starting at the



present day, right away back 2 million years.”

Important Finds In 1936 Louis married Mary Douglas Nicol. Mary was an archaeologist and joined Louis in his search for evidence of early humans in Africa. In 1959, Mary discovered the skull of a primate—a category that includes humans, apes, monkeys, and the ancestors of these mammals. The skull belonged to an early humanlike being called an australopithecine. Like humans, australopithecines are hominids, creatures that walk upright on two feet. Louis at first believed that the skull was about 600,000 years old. However, further study proved that the fossil was about 1.75 million years old.

In 1964 the Leakeys reported another important discovery—*Homo habilis*, or “man of skill.” Believed to be 2 million years old, this hominid displayed human characteristics. Louis Leakey believed that *Homo habilis* was the first toolmaker.

In 1978, Mary Leakey discovered the

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HISTORY MAKERS: LOUIS LEAKEY CONTINUED

footprints of three hominids—two adults and a child. The footprints formed a trail and had been preserved by volcanic ash. They were about 3.6 million years old. Mary wrote, “It is tempting to see them as a man, a woman, and a child.”

Expanding Horizons Louis Leakey’s career was not limited to the study of fossils. He also was an active conservationist who promoted game preserves in East Africa. His writings covered many subjects, including natural history and human origins.

Louis developed a keen interest in primatology—the study of mammals most closely related to humans. His research and findings inspired others. In her book *Reason to Hope*, Jane Goodall names Louis Leakey as the person responsible for the start of her career. Goodall spent many years observing chimpanzees in the wild. Leakey also supported projects by Dian Fossey and Birute Galdikas-Brindamour. Fossey studied mountain gorillas in Africa. Galdikas-Brindamour worked with orangutans in Indonesia.

A Family Matter As he grew older, Louis began spending less time in the field and more time lecturing. By then, however, Jonathan—the oldest of the three Leakey sons—was assisting Mary in her work with fossils. Soon, son Richard also joined the family business.

When Louis died in 1972, two generations of Leakeys were carrying on the work he had begun. The family’s discoveries have greatly increased our knowledge of human origins and of our early human ancestors. *Time* magazine chose the Leakey family as among the 20th century’s most influential scientists.

Review Questions

1. Why did Louis Leakey decide to become an archaeologist?
2. What theory of Darwin’s did Louis Leakey support?
3. What studies in primatology did Louis Leakey help to promote?

Critical Thinking

4. **Understanding Cause and Effect** What might have caused so many members of the Leakey family to enter the same field?
5. **Summarizing** How did major discoveries by Louis Leakey prove Darwin’s theory about human origins?
6. **Drawing Conclusions from Sources** Why do you think that Louis Leakey influenced the work of others?